Two preliminary points need to be clarified before we address ourselves to the problem of the concept of Universal Monarchy in ancient India. The first one concerns the rigorous and peculiar distinction between Politics and Temporal Power. The second one concerns a focussing on the links which bound the Monarch – however defined – and the Priesthood.¹

After focussing on these two points, it will be evident that it was one argument indeed, examined from two different points of view.

Temporal power, Kṣatra in Sanskrit, in the whole of the principles ruling the world of man and their enactment in practice. Kṣatra derives from kṣetra, which means field. This is because this world of man, inhabited by men, and for this reason defined as “human”, is an ex tension, a vastness², extending indefinitely in the horizontal plane.

This must not lead us to a false interpretation of astronomical geography. The world is flat and the field extends to infinity in the horizontal plane; it does not extend vertically either up or down, and so doesn’t reach the sky and know the gods, nor does it reach the hells below and know the titans, the antigods³. Temporal power consists of the Kingdom on the field, kṣetra, merely the world we live in.⁴ The rules under which this kingdom operates are described

as *Artha*, a term sometimes translated as politics. We have to linger a moment on this term.

In classical India four ideals — *catuvarga* — were celebrated: *Kāma, Artha, Dharma, Mokṣa*. Each of them is the subject of several works of doctrine, that is *Śāstras* or *Śūstras*. Very popular as erotic texts in the West, the *Kāma Śūtras* go far beyond erotica. They comprehend the whole world of desire and, of course, love is a part of this world. The desire for wealth and power is also encompassed by the term *kāma*.

*Artha Śāstras* are political tracts dealing with administration and defence. *Dharma Śāstras* are tracts which deal with religious laws, including those principles which govern cosmic order *Rīa*. We can say that *Dharma* maintains harmony throughout the Universe, producing order *Rīa*. *Dharma* is then Universal Law, informing the world and ordaining the hierarchy of worlds and beings. In Human Society, *Dharma* lays down rules of conduct and ritual codes in the *Dharma Śūstras*, which are a blend of liturgical manual and caste rule-book, as many Indologists have translated the term *Dharma* as Religion — rough translation which will do, four our purposes.

The word *Dharma* derives from a Sanskrit root *Dr*, which embodies the idea of fixity; another word of the same etymology is the mythic name of the Pole Star, *Dhrūva*, the Fixed One. In this context we must mention the fact that, in India, the dome of heaven is perceived as an umbrella, whose handle is the *Axis Mundi*, and the point of intersection of umbrella and handle is the Pole Star itself. We shall refer to this again.

*Dharma*, then, is the principle of stability ruling the moving Universe, without participating in that movement and imposing order — *Rīa* — upon chaos — *Aṇīta*. Incidentally, there is an etymological link between *Rīa* and *ritus*, rite, ritual.

Finally *Mokṣa*, Liberation, which signifies the transcending of all the limitations of the relative world and the identification with the absolute *Brahman* through the path of the Supreme Knowledge. *Mokṣa* is the characteristic ideal of the priestly caste, of the hermits who forsake the world to dedicate themselves to contemplation and the study of Metaphysics contained in the *Brahma Śūtras*.

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5 O. Botto, *Società e Stato nell'India Classica*, in Max Weber e l'India, CeS-MEO, Torino 1986.
7 "If Mokṣa is meant to be included in the first word 'dharma', that it would not be necessary to mention 'Mokṣa' as an independent ideal at the end. Therefore,
that domain lies outside the limits of this essay.

The three previous ideals – which work in the world – are characteristic of the aristocratic caste, the Kṣatriya: that is the rulers of the Kṣetra, the field, and the incarnations of the Kṣatra, the Temporal Power.

In this context, we can state that Kāma, desire, is the least noble ideal of the Kṣatriya and therefore they graciously delegate the power of Kāma to the caste immediately below them, the Vaiśya, the merchants. The desiring of wealth, enjoyment and physical pleasure, is ascribed to the field which the two castes have in common.

Artha, the Art of Government, comprehends the administration of justice, the waging of war and management of the economy. Economy has a natural link with Kāma and the merchant caste.

The books of Artha Sāstra are famous for their unscrupulous Machiavellianism – bribery, use of poison, for instance. The difference between the Artha Sāstra and the common idea of Machiavellianism is that the former counsels immoral methods only to preserve the state, never for the self-advancement of the Principe (Prince).

If we stop our investigation at this point, it would seem that Indian Politics and Western Politics are not so different. It is the concept of Dharma which relegates politics to the role of pure instrument.

Dharma is the domain of Kṣatriyas. The nobles learn the Dharma from the Brāhmaṇas, the priests, who are the repositories of

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8 For the relations between the Brāhmaṇas's caste and Mokṣa, see Mānava Dharma Sāstra, VI, 36-85 and XII, 83-104.

7 Kṛṣṇa answers the Kṣatriya Arjuna: "... whatever utility there is in all the Vedic ritual, all that is comprehended in the utility of the right knowledge possessed by a Brāhmaṇa who has renounced the world and has completely realised the Truth concerning the Absolute Reality... you are qualified for works alone, not for the path of Knowledge". Bhagavad Gītā, Sankara Bhāṣya, II, 46-47.

10 The Vaiśya often were ministers: in Java, among nine dynasties of Kings, six were of Vaiśya caste. See L. SANTA MARIA, Le influence indiane classiche nel mondo malese-indonesiano, in Indologia Taurinensia, Torino 1974, II vol.

this knowledge. Dharma is the common domain of nobles and priests, just as kāma is the domain which is common to nobles and merchants. Dharma legitimizes Artha which becomes harmonious with the order of the Universe. In other words, Kṣatra, Temporale Power, uses Artha, Politics, to realize, to make real, Dharma, Universal Law.

Temporal Power doesn’t just benefit the state and the subject, it permeates them; it permeates and affects the Universe. That is to say, Dharma transforms universal chaos into cosmic order.

Spiritual Authority, Brāhma, teaches this doctrine and controls its realization. The Art of Government becomes Temporal Power; little by little governing approaches Dharma. There is a contrary tendency: for Government to become mere politics and to separate from Dharma.\(^{12}\)

The Brāhmaṇa is the husband, and the King is the wife of the cosmic hierogamy. Priestliness then is the superior part of Kingship. The priest chants to the King: “I am that, Thou art this. I am Sky, Thou art Earth”\(^{13}\). And: “We (the Priests) have placed the Thunderbolt in Thy hands”\(^{14}\), accipe sceptrum, take the sceptre.

We don’t understand why some Indologists have supposed that in ancient times the Priesthood was subject to the Temporal Power\(^{15}\). There is no doubt that, historically, rebellions of Kṣatriyas against the Priesthood occurred. The birth of Buddhism and Jainism are the historical proofs of such episodes. Such mutinies happened because previously, and from time immemorial, the Brāhmaṇaṣ had been the undisputed authorities in India. Rg Veda itself, the most ancient hindu scripture, declares: “To the King, in whose realm the Brāhma goeth first, the people pay homage of their own will”\(^{16}\).

In order to consummate the marriage between Brāhma and Kṣatra, there must be an exaltation of the noble to priestly dignity. This Ritual is called Rāja-sūya, that is the quickening or animating of the King. Through a rite of initiation, the noble undergoes symbolic

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\(^{12}\) About the separation or opposition of Artha and Dharma see L. Dumont, Les conceptions de la royauté dans l’Inde ancienne, in Homo Hierarchicus, Éssai sur le système des castes, Gallimard, Paris 1986, pp. 351-375.

\(^{13}\) Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, VIII, 27.

\(^{14}\) Rg Veda, II, 11.4.

\(^{15}\) J.C. Heesterman, The Conundrum in the King’s Authority, in J.F. Richards “Kingship and Authority in South Asia”, Un. of Wisconsin Press, Madison Wis., 1978, pp. 1-27.

\(^{16}\) R. V., V, IV, 50, 7-9.
sacrifice. Water plays a central function as does oil for certain European Monarchs. In addition, there are many details which recall the coronation ceremony of the Holy Roman Empire. In fact, at the beginning of the ritual, the Kṣatriya prostrates himself at the foot of the Priest. At the end of the ritual it is the Brāhmaṇa who prostrates himself proclaiming the noble Adhirāja-rajan, King of Kings. We must not confuse this title with such titles as Shab-in-shah or Baddshah. The nobles in the vedic period were defined as Rāja, the Royal Ones, because all the Kṣatriyas are virtual Kings. Only the one who is chosen by the Priesthood for the Rāja-sūya is the effective King, the first among the virtual Kings, and in this sense King of Kings. This is the first literary reference to the Indo-european concept of Primus inter pares.

The Rāja becomes “wife” to the priest, that is disciple of the Brāhmaṇa called Purohitā, the Chaplain, who is the Rāja’s guru and imparts the doctrine of Dharma. Gradually the Rāja learns the Dharma and approaches its realization on earth through Artha.

The Kingdom, Rājya, conforms progressively to universal order (Rta) in tandem with the spiritual growth of the King. The King becomes the Voice, Vac, of the Priesthood, which is the Intellect, Manas, of the human society. The Voice commands the other nobles, the merchants and the people.

“The dual Government of King and Priest knows all purposes intellectually, and announces them verbally.” “Were it not for Intellect, Voice would merely bubble.” This brings back to the beginning of this brief study: in effect the King who ruled his state only through Artha and without performing Rāja-sūya and thus developed a profane or secular politics, would merely bubble.

His case is comparable with that of a painter who commands sophisticated technique, without inspiration; he paints tables, but doesn’t produce works of Art.

When, on the other hand, the Rāja becomes disciple of the Purohitā, then he is inspired by the Dharma. He can illuminate his whole Kingdom like the sun, and measure it by his own eyes. He is

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17 S. Piano, L’India antica e la sua Tradizione, ed. D’Anna, Messina-Firenze, 1975, pp. 61-62.
18 In the Puranic age this term was substituted by the word “raja-put”.
20 Ashtreya Aranyaka, I, 3.2.
21 Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, III, 2.4.11.
22 S. Piano 1975, pp. 70-71.
helped by twelve “jewels”: the first among them is the Queen; others include the Rājā’s horse, his elephant, and so on. The number twelve is an allusion to the fact that the sun is Lord over the signs of the Zodiac. The solar symbolism became prevalent at the court of Adhirāj-rajanām. Gold expresses, in mineral terms, sunlight. The lion, Simha, represent Kingship among quadrupeds, and is often a royal title (the Great Lion), a general honorific of the Kṣatriyas (Lions of Rājaputra), a noble surname (Mr. Simha) 23.

The King’s weapons are the bow and arrows, and his sceptre is the thunderbolt. The bow is the sun, because it shoots in all directions, as the sun its rays.

From this stems the complex symbolism of the gift of the bow to a knight by wisemen, hermits, Brāhmaṇas, recurrent throughout the Indo-European literature: the test of the bow to make manifest the true king 24.

The vajra, the bolt, the weapon of Zeus, Thor, Indra, the Kings of the gods, is represented by a spray of sunbeams.

The Cakravartin is rather mysterious but it is present in ideal form or embodied as a real person at every stage of Indian History.

There are two possible translations of the term Cakravartin, both close in meaning: Cakra always means wheel 25, and vartin can be understood as he who lives in the wheel. The second translation of vartin is he who turns the wheel 26.

Both versions express roughly the same idea: Cakravartin is the King who is at the hub of the wheel and imparts movement. Here is the principle of motor immobilitis; the still centre of the turning world.

It is more difficult to define the Cakra. We know that a Cakra was a cutting weapon, a hollow disc with a sharp rim which was twirled on one’s index finger and flew at one’s enemy 27. It would be simplistic and reductionist to conclude that Cakravartin derives solely from the spinning disc. The cakra is the preferred weapon of the

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Cakravartin, just as the bow for the Rājā. We need, however, broader interpretations.

The term of Cakra-vāla used by the most authoritative Dharma Śāstra, the Mānava Dharma Śāstra, is very interesting. Literally, it means the thing which encircles the wheel, represented as the nine mountain chains which mark the rim of the human world and demarcate the earth from the ocean and the sky. The human world forms a ring in the centre of which is Mount Meru. This mythic map of the world is defined as Cakravarti-Kṣetra, the field of Cakravartin; we have extended the concept of Cakravartin and his Kingdom up to the limits of the earth.

Nevertheless, the domain of the Kṣetra doesn’t distinguish between the Cakravartin and the Rājā, but except in terms of spiritual scale. In the Mānava Dharma Śāstra, to which we referred earlier, there is a crucial point: in the centre of the Cakra stands Meru, the cosmic mountain which is the axel of the world, whose summit touches the sky at the point where the Pole Star shines.

Indian Astrology, the Vedaṇga Jyotiṣa, informs us that Meru is surrounded by the Raśi-cakra, the wheel of the Zodiac. This represents a further expansion beyond the world we inhabit.

The Cakravartin, at the hub of the wheel, sits on the summit of Meru. The cosmic mountain pivots on the Pole Star, the only fixed point in the sky. So the Cakravartin is the Pole Star, that is to say the Dharma.

The Cakravartin’s knowledge of the Dharma is so perfect that he becomes one with the object of knowledge; knower and known are one. His superiority over the Rājā is immeasurable and the latter, with the twelve signs of the Zodiac revolves around the Universal King in the Raśi-cakra.

The symbols of the Cakravartin have no connection with the sun: those symbols are Cakra, the umbrella, Chatra, the eagle Garuḍa, King of all flying creatures, the column, the mountain, and

28 Mānava Dharma Śāstra, IV, 242.
29 “For the mark of Viṣṇu’s discus is visible in the hand of one who is born to be Cakravartin, one whose Power is invincible even by the gods”. Viṣṇu Purāṇa, XIII.
31 Matrā Purāṇa, CXXVII, 28-29.
33 O.H. DE A. WIJESKARA, The Symbolism of the Wheel in the Cakravartin
so on. The Cakravartin has seven jewels, not twelve, because the number seven alludes to the seven stars of the Great Bear, in Sanskrit Sapta Rṣa, Septem-triones 34.

In the Indian scriptures we find two more Cakras, both more comprehensive than the Raṣṭ-cakra: these are the Kāla-cakra and the Dharma-cakra. The former is time which comprehends the whole cosmos 35. It orbits Śiva as Time god. Śiva is described as a terrifying omnipotence, as mover and destroyer of all beings. Like Saturn-Kronos, the reaper and murderer. One of the attributes of Śiva as Death god, is Dharma Rājā, and that is very significant because it is also the title of the Cakravartin 36.

The Cakravartin is Lord of Dharma-cakra, because he became the source of cosmic law 37. As monarch, he is Universal, in that he transcends time, order and all the world.

Therefore, after the Rāja-sūya, he must perform one or more times, the horse-sacrifice. After this ritual called Aśvamedha, the King is recognized through the cosmos as Cakravartin 38. A white horse is chosen to represent the sun. The would-be Cakravartin leads his army and court, and they all urge the horse to move ahead of them in a northerly direction. This journey lasts six months and represents the transit of the sun towards the North. The sacred horse passes through several Kingdoms, always honoured with reverence and fear. During this six-months period, twelve Kings who have already performed the Rāja-sūya, must publicly identify him as Cakravartin and become his disciples. Being merely a spiritual recognition, seldom in history has, this procession of the Cakravartin, been subject to rejection or interference, and then, only by non-hindus 39.

In the next six months, the horse is urged towards the South –

35 “The great Cakra having the form of a wheel, greater even than the Wheel of the Universe or the eternal Wheel of Time: may that discus of the Lord of the Discus Protect you”, Śoḍaśaṇyudha-bhāṣya, 2.
38 P.E. DUMONT, L’Aśvamedha. Description du sacrifice solennel du cheval dans le culte védique, Louvain 1927.
39 The most famous episod concerns the Aśvamedha performed by Puṣyamitra Śunga: the Greeks of Baktriana stole the horse. The King rescued the horse, and
the journey mimics the annual cycle of sun⁴⁰--; the horse is tethered to a post which is the Axis Mundi. There the horse is sacrificed. His carcass is draped with a golden cloak covered in stars (śarpa), the cloak of Cakravartin. This is the cloak of the sky which drapes the polestar King.

The slain horse is transformed into a Pegasus, a winged steed flying the King to Dhruta. In the moment of transformation, the symbolism shifts from the sun to North Star⁴¹.

The Cakravartin embodies a fusion of sacred and temporal power. This Kingdom of peace and justice extends to all beings, even to the barbarians who do not recognise him. Therefore those who assumed this extraordinary title did not demand universal recognition.

It is worthy of note that the title of Cakravartin never became hereditary like the titles of the Roman, Medieval, Chinese and Japanese Emperors. The title was conferred only on particular individuals who were seen by their peers and by the priesthood as identified with Dharma⁴².

Like the sacred yogin, the Cakravartin is outside normal rules. His corpse is discarded and not burnt: that is because this lofty personage doesn't need consolation, nor is there any need of measures to placate the deceased. Popular veneration covered his body with a simple cairn of stones⁴³. Near the cairn, stūpa in Sanskrit, a pole was erected which commemorated his polar function.

Few stūpas survive in their original, simple form: forlorn remnants of a forgotten and epic myth.

When Buddha was dying, he expressed the desire for his corpse to be covered with stones like an ancient Cakravartin⁴⁴. As he said


⁴⁰ For the Indian cyclic concept of time, see the classical Book of India Eras, by Sir A. Cunningham, Indological Book House, Varanasi 1970, II ed.

⁴¹ Some post remains in Kutei (Borneo), see L. SANTA MARIA, 1974.

⁴² B.G. Tilak, 1925, ch. III.

⁴³ J.W. Spellmann, Political Theory of Ancient India. A Study of Kingship from the earliest Times to circa a.D. 300. Claredon Press, Oxford 1964, pp. 99. In the Mahabharata there is a list of sixteen celebrated Cakravartins: they are these: Marutta Avikṣira, Shotra, Ātiśīna, Bhṛdaratha Vira, Sivi Aśānara, Bharata Daśyanti, Rāma Daśarathī, Bhagiratha, Dīnā Śālavīla, Khatvāṅga, Māndhārī Yauvanāśva, Yayāti Nāihuṣa, Ambarisa Nabhāgī, Sāśānuśa Cāitraratha, Gaya Amūtarayasa, Rāridaya Saṅkṛti, Sagara Aikṣvāku, Prthv Value. All these are well-known mythic personalities, except the last one who appears only here in the Hindu scriptures.

this, he pointed out a stūpa and its pole: ironia della sorte, because Buddha, a Prince, had refused the Rāja-sūya to become a monk.

During his retreat in the desert, the temptor offered him the title of Cakravartin. He refused in order to become a Buddha. When Buddha delivered his first public discourse in Benares, he set in rotation the wheel of the law, like a Cakravartin. We owe a debt of gratitude to Buddha, because it was he who promoved the first scriptural reference to the Cakravartin's a stūpas.

The Finnish scholar A. Parpola records that in the Indus civilisation they have observed many traces of symbols of Cakravartin, like the cloak tārya, for instance. The first historical evidence of the proclamation of a Cakravartin relates to Pusyamitra Sunga, in the year 187 B.C. The second historical reference occurs in the fifth century A.D.; the proclamation of the King Samudragupta of Gupta dynasty. After that, Pulakesin Chalukya was proclaimed Cakravartin in the sixth century. In the seventh century there were two Cakravartins: Adityasena Gupta and Svaskonda Varman Pallava. The last reference to a Cakravartin concerns a King of the Ganga dynasty of Orissa, in the IX century.

We come across some stories in this tradition from Indonesia. In Bali there was an Aśvamedha in the XI century; on that occasion, during this ritual, somehow the horse got lost and only its penis remained. It is believed that some tribe of the mountains performed the sacrilege. The lingam of the horse became an object of worship on the island.

In the thirteenth century two kings of the Srivijaya dynasty of Java were proclaimed Cakravartins. On the Indian mainland, the Mugal muslim Emperors, not daring to claim the Hindu title of Cakravartin, took the title of Dharma Rajas. The celebrated hero Śivāji, Rāja of Poona in the 1674 assumed the title of Chatrapati, the lord of the umbrella, a timid but clear allusion.

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45 A. DANIÉLOU, 1971, IV, 3.
47 H.B. SARKAR, Cultural Relations between India and Southern Asian Countries, I.C.C.R. & M. Banarsidass, Delhi 1985, ch. 11.
48 A. DANIÉLOU, 1971, V, 3. Before the rite Śivāji gave public proofs of his
Historically, the ideal has stupendous stamina. B.G. Tilak (1856-1920), called Lokamanya, “the Honoured by the World”, in the beginning of own century, was the leading Nationalist anti-British figure; he publicly claimed to be – and was in fact – descendent from the Cītāvan Brāhmaṇaś, who had the right to anoint the Cakravartins. In this direction, he supported the ideal of the Svārāj – often translated with self-government or independence – as a re-manifestation of an Universal Kingdom of peace and justice 31.

We must point out that the sanskrit term of Svārāj(ya) designated the Kingdom of the Cakravartin rather then the idea of independence.

Gandhi also hinted at the symbols of the Cakravartin, especially when he was intrested by an other ideal of Universal Kingdom, the Khilafat. Up till now no scholar has studied this aspect of the Mahatma’s interest towards that rebellion of 1922-25. Gandhi reinforced the concept of Svārāj(ya) in the spiritual sense, and rescued it from any imperial or imperialistic interpretation.

In our opinion it is not an accident that the new-born Indian Republic assumed two symbols, the cakra and the head of a column with four lions, both being emblems of Cakravartin.

We must conclude these few remarks with some iconographic observations. The symbols of the Cakravartin are not very frequent in Indian Art: Irwin gave an unequivocal demonstration that the classical symbols have been the stūpa and the column 41. Heinrich Zimmer identified only one icon representing a Cakravartin: it is about the famous panel found at Jaggayapeta, now in the Madras Museum 42. No doubt on the identification: in fact the Cakravartin, under the shadow of the chaṭra, is surrounded by his seven jewels: the wheel, the queen, the horse, the elephant, the general (= sword), the treasurer (= treasur), the gem. This personage, who has been identified as King Mandhata, is rappresented as a Yakṣa giant wearing a monumental turban, in the style of the Yakṣas of the stūpa of Bharut. In spite of the affirmations of Gopinatha Rao, in the icons the Cakravartin does not wear the Nārāyana headgear in the shape of a truncated cone 33.

appartenance to the Kṣatriya caste: M. Edwardes, A History of India, Thames and Hudson, London 1961, III, IV.
31 M. Edwardes, VI, IV, 2.
The horse of this panel is very interesting too; Biswas maintains that this horse looks not like a real horse, but appears as if it is a wooden toy-horse. This opinion approaches the horse of the Cakra-ravartin to the steed of Revanta or Rivanār, the keepers or the field: actually these two minor divinities play the role of sacred Kings in the domain of the spirits. More interesting is the opinion of Sivaramamurti, who explains the shape of the horse in the panel of Jaggayyapeta as a Pegasus, the winged steed of the Aśvamedha.

Many scholars maintain that there are other icons of the Cakra-ravartin in Indian Art, but the absence of some symbols of the Universal Monarch lead us to the caution. Only one more specimen certainly represents the Cakra-ravartin. It is the icon of Khasarpāna Lokeśvara of Chaudhuvar as considered by Stella Kramrisch. This image describes Avalokiteśvara as Lord of the world and, to this purpose, it awards to the Bodhisattva all the jewels of the Cakra-ravartin.

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B.N. Sharma approaches the iconography of Revanta to the Kalkin: more interesting would be the study of the iconography of Kalkin as Cakra-ravartin.
57 T.K. Biswas, pp. 60-62.